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研究論文

Writing as a Means of Inner Peace — Poems from Changi Literary Circle —

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Abstract

At the Second World War, Australian and British prisoners-of-war (POWs) under the Imperial Japanese Army formed a literary circle in the prisoner-of-war camp in Changi, Singapore. This paper deals with the writings by members of Changi Literary Circle, and examines what the writings meant to POWs and what they tell us about the meaning of peace. The writers in Changi had lost almost everything. However, even under oppressive conditions, they did not lose their passion and resisted oppression in a creative way. Their war memory is at the same time creativity with significant aspirations for peace.

Key-words

POW, Changi, literary circle, cultural activities

Introduction

Changi, Singapore, was the biggest prisoner-of-war (POW) camp in East and Southeast Asia region under the Imperial Japanese Army at the Second World War. In 2004, the Singaporean government pulled down the previous-camp gaol, which was a difficult decision against wishes of the Australian's eager push to preserve it. This news drew the enormous attention and discussions in the section of "Have Your Say" on the website of *The Sydney Morning Herald*¹. The word "Changi" does not only mean the place any more, but conceals and releases various memories.

One of the obscure sides of Changi, which has been neglected for a long time, is its cultural significance. Various cultural activities from concert party to literary circle were carried out in Changi camp in spite of the severe camp conditions. These cultural activities were identified by media from time to time, but have never been discussed by academics: neither in history nor in cultural studies. Because of the limitation of the words, this paper focuses on the poems of Changi prisoners and aims to understand

the validity of such literature in peace studies. What did the writings mean to POWs during the war, and what do they tell us about the meaning of peace? This paper will show how writing served Changi writers as a means of inner peace— a state of being with equanimity.

After the general value of writing in the first section, the various cultural activities organised in Changi camp, especially Changi Literary Circle, will be described. In the following section, the poems created by members of Changi Literary Circle will be examined. Most of the analysis is based on a book *Passion for Peace: Exercising Power Creatively* by Stuart Rees, the former Director of the Centre for Peace & Conflict Studies at the University of Sydney.

I have been drawn to Australia for almost fifteen years, and what strikes me is, anywhere you go, even in a small town, there is a war memorial. For a Japanese of the two generations down from the war generation, this presence of the war memory has been somehow haunting. I feel it is something that I cannot shun away from and something that has been

always stuck to me. This paper is also my journey to understand processes of reconciliation. Could this war memory be transformed to become a peace memory?

1. The value of writing

I have had a habit of writing a diary. As a British writer Vera Brittain, who went through the First World War and the Second World War, describes her now famous wartime diary as “a refuge— indeed, a survival tool— ”², the diary is the place I meet myself quietly. To express myself, to confess the secret, to soothe down my feeling, and also to record my life. It is strewn with my anger, fear, confusion, sadness, guilty, happiness, excitement and hope. Special messages to somebody special which would never be delivered, and “trivial” things which I would never bother to share with somebody else, are nevertheless waiting to be expressed. I look back on yesterday’s entry. I meet one-day younger me. Writing a diary is an opportunity to learn from the past, to face the present and to project conversations in my future.

The Polish Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz, who got engaged in the resistance movement under Nazi occupation, clung to poetry for survival. He described poetry “as essential as bread”³. On top of any other styles of writing, poetry can convey a vivid image. A powerful message can be condensed into such a few words. Poetry embraces the power to melt, harden, or shake readers’ hearts in an instant. After all, as Nise Malange and Shaun de Waal say, “Poetry is a dynamic form that can be used as a force for change as well as for healing”⁴.

Not only diary or poetry but also overall writing has seized people and served as their mental pillars. Then, what is the value of writing? Why is writing so powerful in our life?

Firstly, writing can enable individuals to regain a sense of control and power: a sense of control over the external world: what is happening around. By giving a description to the abstract phenomena around oneself, giving them meanings and shaping concepts, an author understands and constructs the present, as reality. By doing it, the author gains a sense of control and power: a strategy in order to live now, in effect to survive.

Secondly, writing releases feeling, tension, fear, and anger, and overcomes feelings of powerlessness. An Aboriginal writer Alexis Wright fighting for Indigenous right says,

Writing was a way of consoling myself in this crisis of the mind to the very real threat we were facing as Waanyi people⁵.

Writing makes the feeling, the suffering inside oneself cut from oneself, throws it into an outer space and makes the feeling objective. As Spinoza says in his *Ethics*, “Emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it”⁶.

By these two ways: absorption of the external world into the internal world and projection of the internal world to the external world, writing restores the self and makes one recognise the connection with the outer space and the inner self.

2. Changi Literary Circle*

Changi camp

On February 15, 1942, Singapore, which had been regarded as the Britain’s bastion in the Far East, was surrendered to the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA). It was just one week after IJA landed on the island

* It is sometimes called “Changi Literary Society”. This paper sticks to the use of “Changi Literary Circle” in order to prevent the confusion.

and about 15,000 Australian diggers mainly from 8th Division, became prisoners-of-war (POWs) along with 35,000 British troops. Two days later, on February 17, they were marched to the north-eastern part of the island called Changi, sixteen miles away from the city of Singapore. Australians were stationed at Selarang Barracks, which was originally for accommodating only 900 people. Some of them spent the following three and a half years there, the others were dispatched to many destinations from there such as Borneo, the Thai-Burma railway, “Manchuria” or Japan. In Borneo, 2,000 Australian and 500 British POWs were marched for 260 km from Sandakan to Ranau, and only six of them survived this “death march”. For the Thai-Burma railway, 65,000 Allied POWs including 13,000 Australians were mobilised to engage in the construction. This work produced 12,000 fatalities**. Thus, Changi served as a central base for sending workforce in East and Southeast Asia region.

Because of the notorious reputations of those camps which they were sent to, Changi had been also seen as a hell characterised by Japanese atrocities. Unprepared for holding POWs, however, IJA issued an order that the Allied officers would govern the POWs by themselves. There was little contact with Japanese for the first six months. Stan Arneil, one of the POWs mentions,

It was possible to remain at Changi and rarely see a guard: the camp was administered by Brigadier Black Jack Galleghan almost as it would have been at any Australian Army Camp⁷.

At daytime, POWs were driven to work for rebuilding the city of Singapore. However, they had their own time at hand between the evening meal and

bedtime. Another POW, David Griffin reflects that the wide mass of the troops had nothing to do but chat. The two main topics were food and the news⁸. A daily ration for every POW was limited to 1.1023 pounds of rice, .11032 pounds of meat, .11032 pounds of flour, .22 pounds of vegetables, .033 pounds of milk, .044 pounds of sugar, .011 pounds each of salt, tea and cooking oil⁹. Griffin continues,

Since there was no food worthy of the name and no authentic news whatsoever, conversation on these points was unproductive of anything except argument. Some form of distraction was imperative if spirits were to be maintained¹⁰.

Education Centre

A far-sighted Brigadier Harold Burfield Taylor (in private life the government analyst in New South Wales), realised that

Though food for the body would be in short supply, food for the mind would be shorter still and accordingly must be provided somehow¹¹,

and launched an education scheme as soon as February 19. Taylor, assisted by Captain Adrian Curlewis (later a judge of the New South Wales District Court), assembled a small group of Australians as teachers and lecturers under the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) Education Centre. Captain Leslie Greener commanded the centre. By March 1, just fifteen days after the capitulation, three educational classes, Agriculture, Business Training and General Education, quickly commenced. This was the beginning of so called “Changi University”. The enrolment of students for the agriculture reached

* * Besides Allied POWs, some 300,000 Asian coolies were forced to work at the railway and half of them perished there. In addition, about 1,000 Japanese soldiers died too.

600 to 700, 1,900 for business, and 2,300 for general education. Later, the classes expanded and varied from Languages, Engineering, Law, Medicine, and Science. Every individual who was not engaged in regular duty was obliged to enrol in at least one subject. Education staff included Alexander Downer (later Minister for Immigration in the Menzies Government), John Eric Kelynack, Tony Newsome and Bruce Blaikey. Leaving their respective units, these men were given a small specially assigned room and were spared from being on the workforce. Charles Huxtable, a medical officer in the British Army, praises it as below.

They make a good team and are a nice lot of fellows. David Griffin gave an excellent course of lectures on English literature, one night a week for about a month¹².

Library

Prior to the Education Centre, POWs started exchanging their books after the period of shock and the listlessness of capitulation. “‘Got a book you could loan me, Mate?’ The shock was over. Life was beginning again”¹³, Griffin recollects. Then, the individual exchange developed to libraries stocking the books donated by POWs. Every time POWs went to the city as working parties, they came back to the camp with books in their rucksacks. Some hundreds of volume were made available by IJA too. Later, the books from the International Red Cross sent by shipment were also added. Griffin estimates the total number of books far exceeded 20,000. Some books were those they could not obtain at home around that time. George Sprod, an Australian caricaturist after the war, comments,

And what books! Those pre-war planters and civil servants of Malaya certainly had done themselves proud;

the rarest and most expensive editions dolled up in full Morocco leather, mouth-watering first editions, choice items that had been banned in Australia for years. Australia in those days was running neck and neck with Ireland for book-banning championship of the word; Canberra had a bigger Index (It was widely held) than the Vatican: *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Thorne Smith's racy efforts, Norman Lindsay, Rabelais, Boccaccio and even, whew! such a masterpiece of depravity as Huxley's *Brave New World*¹⁴.

A warrant Officer II David Elder, who became a part of publishing firms including Oxford University Press after the war, also remarks

Life in Changi was not so dismal or restrictive as most people seem to believe, prisoners were resourceful and imaginative in their efforts to keep themselves sane. I had expected that I should be deprived of good books and literary matters during that terrifyingly vague sentence “the period of captivity”, but at Changi camp there were books; not a superabundance to be sure, but a wonderful assortment of surprising quality¹⁵.

There were men who read a book a day, hundreds who read two books a week, some who never read at all, others who were unable to read. But for most men the Library at some time or another played its part and kept them going during the darkest hours¹⁶.

As these commentaries show, Changi was rich in the books and POWs derived great benefit from them. They were not only passive readers. Some started expressing themselves in their own words.

Literary Circle

It was the idea of David Griffin, who was one of the education staff and a librarian, to have a Literary

Circle.

I proposed a literary competition in which all British and Australian men were invited to submit short stories, essays and poems to be judged by a panel who would award certificates to the most successful writer¹⁷.

From that was born the Literary Circle. On August 12, 1943, the first meeting of Literary Circle was held. With Leslie Greener as the chairman, 19 talented Australians and 37 Britains joined the meeting including an Australian writer Stan Arneil, whose diary-based book on POW life titled *One Man's War* received the International PEN Award in 1981, another Australian writer Russell Braddon, whose criticising-scathingly book on POW experience, *the Naked Island*, became a million-seller after the war, Hector Chalmers, head of the Divisional Provost Corps, a British caricaturist Ronald Searle, a thought-reader Sydney Piddington, a Cambridge historian Richard de Grey and J.M.L. Lewis, a brother of author Wyndham Lewis. At every meeting, some of them presented their own literary works and others made comment on them.

The room contains two beds of rough-hewn timber and little else. A single electric bulb illuminates the palm thatched roof giving just enough light for a reader to make out dimly the words appearing on the page. The chairman for the evening announces the first work- a poem perhaps or a short story, or an essay- the nervous author clad in his rags awaits apprehensively the reading of his precious composition to a highly critical and disenchanted audience of fellow writers¹⁸.

There were 90 meetings till August 17, 1945, producing 53 poems, 44 short stories, one play and 20 papers on aspects of English literature. A British

officer described the circle as “our only lighthouse in the darkest night”¹⁹.

Those poems had been kept by Griffin for long time, but were first presented in 1991 at the Country Women's Association in Bowral, New South Wales. Its success led to the presentation at Selarang Barrack in 1992 to mark the 50th anniversary of the fall of Singapore. In 2002, Griffin published an anthology titled *Changi Days: The Prisoner as Poet*, which assembled 36 poems produced in Changi. The poems by POWs were at last to see the light of day in the public eye.

The next chapter examines the poems by members at Literary Circle and discusses what the writings meant to POWs during the war, and how they help us to unravel the meaning of peace.

3. Changi writers from *Changi Days: The Prisoner as Poet*

In this section, I would like to pick four poems and discuss what writing poems meant to POWs and what they tell us about peace.

The first poem was written by an untraced poet who expressed explicitly what writing poems meant to POWs at that time.

Poets in Wartime

Do we, the poets of this generation,
Twisted with our inexpressible songs,
Need roses for our inspiration
And autumn and cool waters?

There are guns now, and H.M.S. Conundrums,
Blackening out life or helping death,
Urging from their apparent doldrums
The poets, to bleak oceans of creation.

Sons, lovers, brothers, daughters,

Weep if you must. And draw your comfort
From the steel tears on our metallic faces,
Or the cold print biting its wartime page.

It is not that our hearts are dead,
Or that the midwife strangled our souls;
We were the tired children of an age,
When life was hard.

The flight of bomb is the flight of birds,
And the flamethrower fires the imagination,
But the core of sorrow, unpeeled, discloses
The futility of words.

Autumn is draughty now and the spice has left it,
The cool waters flow without meaning.
There was a war last winter, mother,
And there were no roses.

The vital message of this poem— that the expression of sorrow is “inexpressible”— a frustration often seen in the accounts of Holocaust: sorrow must be told but at the same time there is no way to tell it. It is beyond description. Marilyn R. Chandler says

That dilemma — needing to tell, but having no available language to describe an experience that has pushed one out to the margins of the tolerable — began to seem an inevitable part of crisis experience²⁰.

This poem is an anguished cry over this dilemma. There is nothing to express except this sorrow. However, the words are futile. The poet who is deprived of words somehow finds the way to release this frustration in a poem. By referring to a silent and deep sorrow. His flow of mind has stopped as “doldrums”, his heart has been disconsolate and has lost the warmth like a “metal”. The soldiers

has become parts of the machine manipulated by the nations and their humanities are deprived. The newspaper is full of reports about war and used as national propaganda without artistic quality. The poet calls this puzzlement ironically “H.M.S. Conundrums”. After all, this poetry is a leaden grief over the war and the loss of art during wartime.

The next poem once again shows the emptiness and frustration that the poet feels.

Exile

By E. Dunsmore

The letter tells me it is spring
O then how painful is the throb
That shakes a mute and stagnant heart
And spurs the eager sight to seek
Spring's image in the jungle here:
As though spring were an exile too.
But when I've built around me walls
Of habit, insular and chill
And, as it were, have put on ice
A replica of English life
I have done everything. Unmoved
The jungle stares me in the face.
I see no fields where colours glow,
Sudden in birth as evening light

Or hills where music visible
As greenness, swells and swells again.
Where are the birds and songs and scents
That my nostalgic mind retracts
From my sweet years and sunken youth?
My answer is a mynah's screech.
Blue is this sky, too blue it seems,
Too green is the unsummered grass,
The attap huts sweat in the sun
The landscape's rigid, beaten brass.

And all through heavy, windless hours
The palms stand sullen, as in glass
Or water that no tremor stirs
On presage of a change to come.
O for some sudden stroke to break
The unmeaning circle where I'm caught,
Some wintry humour grip the soil
With iron, everlasting root.
Let me feel knife-keen winds blast out
The fevers from the poisoned air
And shudder, thin of blood, while sleet's
Bright needle stabs each listless leaf.
Let frosts assault the baked brown earth
And snow, false flower of moonlit nights
Blanch the ribbed branches of the palms
Above the stark and stiffened swamps.
Deep is my hatred of the sun,
Uncaring if he gives me life
Who holds me in a changeless land,
An exile also from myself.

This is a poem expressing the struggle to understand the world where the poet finds himself and to discover how to express his feelings. The poet does not know what he is feeling. He withdraws into his shell, tries to imagine his hometown and take comfort from it, but this does not satisfy him. Being put in a tropical Singapore with the same season all days dragging on and on with no indication of when to be released, he is craving for the contrast, the difference, the rhythm of life given by the English clear-cut and distinct season. One's identity will not be formed without the relationship with the environment. He has lost his youth and his identity. He feels in "exile" from himself.

What is striking in this poem is that so many war words are used ("knife-keen", "poisoned", "blood", "stab", "assault"), which are so strong and so sensuous,

and appeal to the reader's mind. What the poet wants to feel through his body is not the pain from fighting and killing, but the feeling of spring, the feeling of hometown and a familiar life.

Another phrase that should be mentioned in particular is "I've built around me walls". This is a common expression used by other poets in *Changi Days*.

"What walls have risen, when my thought is free
And soars to meet your love, your love for me."

-Changi Impromptu by David Griffin-

"war alone compels

A thousand walls to choke our movements now."

-Another Captive by H. R. Denham-

"Today while I was sitting in the shade
I heard remembrance, like a frustrate tide,
Beating upon the rampart I had made."

-Pain is no Prisoner by R. P. de Grey-

At Selarang Barracks, where the prisoners had been interned, there was no wall, just barbed wires. However, their physical and mental confinements are still expressed poetically as "wall/rampart". As Griffin comments,

Poetry was the key to suddenly unlocking the door and suddenly we were able to put ourselves back in the world that we knew at least. It made a tremendous difference²¹.

It was poetry that made the poets free from this wall. At some time, the poetry gave shelter to them inside the wall. At another time, it released them from the wall mentally.

P.O.W. Changi 1942

By A.C.Glendingning

I am the close imprisoned one who seeks,
Somehow to build the everlasting days
Into a dull monotony of weeks,
To bridge me back again to peaceful ways.
I am the soldier broken on the wheel
Of fortune in a far and foreign land;
Serving my weary time without appeal,
Baffled, dismayed, and slow to understand.
What was the grail for which my comrades died?
How does our honour rest with men who know?
Have we betrayed our trust, surrendered pride
Or taken useful measure of the foe?
Maybe the stars can tell, serenely high,
But scorpion mutely sprawls across the sky.

This beautiful but sceptical sonnet written in the early days embraces three points. First of all, as “I am the close imprisoned one …”, “I am the soldier…” show, this poem attempts to determine a prisoner’s identity. This is a cry from the prisoner’s camp which has been cut off from the rest of the world, wanting to be acknowledged. The individual who moved from being a soldier to a prisoner unexpectedly and after such a short period against his will, still identifies himself as a soldier, not as a prisoner. This shows his intention to see his contribution to the war rather than as a non-combatant prisoner under the control of the enemy. The poet still cannot accept being a POW in Changi in 1942.

Secondly, the poet is trying to understand the world he has been put in, the reason why he is here, by writing this poem. He asks himself why but the questions keep coming up. No matter how much time he spends, there is no answer. He looks at the sky for the answer, but even stars do not shine for the prisoners. In the sky, there is only scorpion which symbolises torture and suffering. His days with hardship also pass by and rustle through.

What remained in him is the meaningless of war, which is the third point. “What was the grail for which my comrades died?” What was the ideal that we were trying very hard to obtain or achieve? He realised that whatever they did there was no success.

The next poem is written by David Griffin when exiting Changi Gaol, at the end of his prisoner days. The book *Changi Days* also finishes with this poem.

The Guns of Peace

By David Griffin

The guns are silent now
And the war is done.
Come then our rescuers, come
With your flags and ribbons,
The pretty playthings nation give
To the side that won.

The war is over now;
I should rejoice,
For I am young- was young,
Until these years advanced
With all their fanfares to the victory,
Forgetting me.

Now I must march again,
Join the new battle
And brave the guns of peace.
Ah, soldier, there is no surrender there,
No hasty truce at hand to still that strife,
No stretcher-bearers gathering our dead hopes,
No prayers to offer for our little deaths in life.

The earth is quiet now,
And the sun and sky
Beckon unchanging to the sunless,
Must we emerge? aye, soldier, aye,

There at the gate stands freedom,
Here stand I.

This is the time which signals a new start, a new struggle for peace. “Must we emerge?” This is the reluctant feeling of POWs who are unsure about their situation, whose whereabouts have been unknown, who have been believed to be dead, and who have been forgotten by the world. One of the members of Literacy Circle, Jim Connor, shows his anxiety upon his release.

I was afraid to go home. I'd been married on final leave. I'd had 14 words from my wife in the three years and nine months that I'd been a prisoner of war. I didn't know whether she still loved me, because she had been notified that I was missing believed killed. And I knew that I had changed because no man could go through the situations that we went through there and remain the same as they were. ... and what did Australia really think about us. Would they receive us back into their fold? Or would we be spurned and say look you're not doing what you were sent out to do²².

Freedom? Peace? What are they? Although they have been longing for such experiences all the time, they are not yet ready to accept them. The poet is trying to make sense of the situation around him, to prepare himself for the next step by depicting his circumstances in a poem. Griffin literally emerged at the post-war with the achievement of a lasting peace in mind, by giving performances around the world and publishing this book so that the rest of us know the situation of POWs, so that we will not forget them.

Only two years after the publication of *Changi Days*, David Griffin passed away. For Griffin, *Changi Days* must have been a conclusion of his life and a legacy to the next generation.

As we saw through above, for POWs, poetry enabled them to express and release inexpressible feelings, to understand their prisoner world, and to seek their identity. In this way, they maintained sanity, regained a sense of control and power, and overcame feelings of powerlessness. Their poetry shows how they survived.

However, the important aspect of Literary Circle was not only in writing, but also the power of sharing. Stuart Rees says that “the experience of coming together to sing has generated courage and hope”²³. It also applies to reading poetry. Experience of reading out in front of other POWs meant being touch with one's humanness. “Tell me more about your poem?” “What do you think about my poem?” are questions which show interest in others: a mark of respect to each person. In the prisoner's camp, which was one of the most inhumane situations, they were trying to touch their humanness. In so doing they found the moment when they restored their self as well as their humanity despite atrocities which they suffered from the Japanese.

After all, the poets were exercising their power successfully in a spontaneous and creative way by sharing creative moment together. Rees talks about the promise of biography as this,

(e)ven under the most distressing conditions, the unravelling of biography could realise a power in being creative, perhaps by developing the potential for everyone to become an artist with respect to their own lives²⁴.

This holds true for the poetry. The prisoners literally became artists as is shown by the subtitle of the book *Changi Days: The Prisoner as Poet*. Moreover, this writing of poetry and sharing it with others became “a process in the redefinition of self, part of a collective struggle and often the only form of

resistance”²⁵ against the situation they were put in.

Conclusion

This paper has dealt with the writing by members of Changi Literary Circle and examined what the writings meant to POWs and what they tell us about the meaning of peace.

For Changi poets represented by David Griffin, poetry expressed and released inexpressible feeling, helped them to understand a prisoner's world, and to seek for one's identity. In this way, they maintained the sanity, regained a sense of control and power, and overcame feelings of powerlessness. The poets found an invaluable sense of fulfilment.

They absorbed the external world into the internal world, comprehended and digested it as their own as well as projected the internal, unsettled feeling to the external world. As Stuart Rees says

(f)ragmentation has been replaced by a feeling of coherence and understanding, the experience of putting things together has contributed to a sense of well-being and direction²⁶,

writing served as a means of peace of mind and empowered Changi writers materially, psychologically, spiritually and politically.

When I was a child, I was often told to write according to my feelings. “Kimochi wo komete kake. (Write with putting your feeling into letters.)” The handwriting reflects who I am, what I am thinking, and what my emotional state is. If I do not put much feeling into letters, they become rumble, with mistakes. The letters are alive. This is one of the reasons why handwritten letters are preferred to email by some people. In Japan, calligraphy is a compulsory subject at school: practicing calligraphy in

a silent and good tense atmosphere with no mistake allowed. Every stroke is in earnest. It concentrates one's attention to the letters, and to the meaning of each word in a composition.

When thinking of the moment I spend in my life in calm, stepping out of the pace of the normal life, I could probably pick up this: when I am writing such as a diary or calligraphy.

When I saw the original diary of Stan Arneil at Australian War Memorial, it took my breath away. A fragile, thin piece of paper was brimful of letters about 1 millimetre in size. Since it was scarce, the paper was of precious value in the camp. The diary was filled with passion. The act of keeping a diary at the end of the day was the equivalent of a prayer for devout Christian Arneil.

The writers in Changi had lost almost everything. However, even under oppressive conditions, they did not lose their passion and resisted oppression in a creative way. Their war memory is at the same time creativity with significant aspirations for peace.

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